A CASE OF CULTURAL COLONIZATION: LEAVE OUR DEATH ALONE!

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A world like no-world is possible uninterrupted by other order of things

Each people has an unique manner to relate to their surroundings, a vision of the Universe (that becomes 'its own'), a *Weltanschauung*, a mentality (or however one chooses to call it), a bond that ultimately defines the way that Being is intuited within a particular cultural space and this feature can be detected at different cultural levels as the one that confers the unity beyond the heterogeneity of its manifestations and creations. This article is an attempt to grasp this specific way of perceiving 'Being,' 'the relationship with Being,' 'the Romanian spirit of Being,' or a vision of the 'nature of things.

Having to rely on outside views to talk about itself, instead of drawing upon its own words and feelings, seems to be the Romanian folk destiny. Since Michelet until now, discussions about the Romanian attitude towards death remain locked in a dichotomy, formulated as a question: Are Romanians resigned to death or not? This is an obvious injustice inflicted upon the Romanian soul. Nobody says that the Danes are Hamlet, the Americans are Tom Sawyer, or the Russian are Ana Karenina. No culture can be understood through a single prevalent feature. The complexity of a people's soul cannot be understood through a single creation or author (no matter how representative), but only through juxtaposition of emblematic creations (popular or cultured) that sprang from its bosom in time. What is most worrying in this example is the fact that Michelet's understanding of the representative Romanian folk ballad *Miorita*, became 'the official interpretation' of the issue and, as such, it has been taught in all Romanian literature classes as the ultimate truth about the Romanian soul. In the class or in the national assessment exams, Michelet's interpretation represents the 'the correct answer.' Every new generation of Romanian pupils learns this about themselves and their culture. They are forced to learn about themselves in terms that do not belong to them and that create an identity alien to their own. And this is definitely a form of cultural colonization: a group whose self-description is imposed by others. It is not surprising that many Romanians demand that this ballad be removed from textbooks because they deem it inappropriate for the education of their children.

At the same time, *Miorita*[1] has always been understood as the embodiment of the (folk) Romanian spirit. "In *Miorita*'s inflections was perceived something from the pride and serenity of the free Dacians, disdaining death - *paratissimi ad mortem*"[2] and the plaintive singing echoing that of the bondwoman whom

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[1] Miorita is a diminutive for a ewe lamb under two years of age. An English translation of this ballad is available online at: http://spiritromanesc.go.ro/Miorita%20-eng.html

[2] "Entirely ready to die" the Geta's description of Pomponius Mela, *The History of Romanians,* vol. I, Bucharest, Academy Print house of RPR, 1961, part II, par. 5.

Bishop Gerard[3] met in the middle of the XIIth century in the Banat region. The shepherd's silent silhouette was gliding over the ballad – *legibus et reliquis et consuetitudine vitae dissident…* – evoked in *Ruinae Pannonica* (Bezdechi 1926-28: 448-449)[4] by the erudite humanist Christianus Schesaeus four centuries later (Pavel 1964).

Aside from trivialized interpretations, unreflective contempt, and unilateral exaggerations, what can this ballad offer us by way of understanding the soul of the Romanian people? With Eliade (1995: 264), we too

> do not want to say that *Miorita* synthesizes the whole features of the Romanian nature. But the 'adhesion' of the entire people to this folklore masterpiece remains significant and the history of Romanian culture cannot be conceived without the exegesis of this solidarity.

The designation of *Miorita* as the most representative depiction of Romanian soul thus seems to be confirmed. But the question remains as to which exact part of this Romanian spirituality is being transmitted in this ballad and how deep can we delve into this mentality? As Eliade put it:

> Three orientations can be observed when studying *Miorita*: firstly, one that could be called historical, because it had strived to reconstruct the ballad's origin and history; secondly, the approaches adopted by the folklorists who engaged in fieldwork, multiplying the number of variants and following the ballad's analysis within the general context of the Romanian folk culture; thirdly, the exegesis of certain poets and

philosophers that identified in *Miorita as* the foremost expression of the national spirit and thus considered as an accurate depiction of the Romanian people' way of Being in the world. (Eliade 1995: 239)

However, in the presence of "many methods," everybody is believed to possess the key to the essence of the phenomenon in question. Therefore, the followers of the first two directions – let us call them, the 'ethno-folklore directions' (C. Brăiloiu, D. Caracostea, A. Fochi, O. Densusianu, I. Diaconu) – consider that '*in situ* research' is the only legitimate way of presenting 'the true face' of the Romanian people because it allows them to establish a direct and close connection between the ballad's themes and socio–economic conditions and transformations, in which it was created. However, is this not just the peak of an iceberg? Is it not more important to explore what lies behind?

Thus, H.H. Stahl (1938) regretted the fact that the monopolization of the readers' attention on Alecsandri's variant of *Miorita* produced the following situation: a person who wants to understand the Romanian nation, instead of visiting the villages in order to gather information that would be methodically analyzed afterwards, ponders the text of the ballad and analyzes it philosophically and literally. As Stahl put it elsewhere (Stahl 1983: 161):

> if out of the entire Romanian folk only *Miorita* were to survive, the next centuries throughout their literary analysis would be faced with nothing but a splendid and tempting question mark. But we live amidst the Romanian people, still full of life. And without trying to upset anybody it seems somehow ridiculous to me to limit ourselves to a 'literary analysis' of *Miorita* in order to discover the Romanian beliefs about death… when all we need to do is to go in the field and collect the infinite (sic! n.n.)

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[3] *Legenda Maior Sancti Gerardi,* in *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum,* Budapest, 1936, Vol. II, *The Romania's History*, Academy Print house of RPR, vol. II, part I, 1962, chapter 4, par. 1.

[4] And here is the translation of the lyrics, according the same author: "Different by the people around it by living and law."

quantities of material offered by thousands of villages in Romania.

The researchers' conclusions based on field research lead us to believe that *Miorita* is far from being a story about "death as a sacramental act" and "nature as church," "two grievous and essential visions of Orthodox transfiguration of reality" (Blaga), of the "nuptial death" related to the "death's nostalgia," "within its Thracian sense" or a "mystical solidarity between man and nature, inaccessible to modern conscience" or a possible answer to "history's terror," an imposition of "a meaning for the absurd itself" (Eliade), but as Stahl put it:

> the lyrics of *Miorita* are basic paraphrases of those songs (funeral rituals, n.n), in other words, clever quotations from the class of ritual dirge, used sometimes in ballads and sometimes in carols, so that they would load in the mind of the one who understood the theme of the ritual with all the meaning expressed in it. (Stahl 1983: 161)

He wrote furthermore that the verses of *Miorita* do not at all describe the unique miracle of art, but a common place of Romanian lyric" (Stahl, 1983: 163) and that, finally, the poem addresses only one of the basic themes of our entire folk philosophy (the wedding with the death), something that we could call "the danger born by the life's inexhaustibility" - meaning the fear of wraiths (specters, phantoms).

Not even Eliade's attempt to strike a middle course between scientific research and the phenomenon's theorization was spared criticism from this camp. Its 'cosmic Christianity,' in which, in his vision, the ballad is grounded, is considered a hypothesis unsupported by the sociological facts. Also, it seems exaggerated that the theory that sustains the Miorita is an expression of prehistoric rituals turned into contemporary folklore.

The fact that "he (the shepherd n.n.) succeeds in transmuting a desperate event into a sacramental act, taking into account the fact that the death of the young shepherd turns into a bridal celebration of cosmic amplitude" (Eliade 1995: 261) seems to involve many assumptions belonging to the history of religions. In other words, only the epical fact is presented in the ballad, "all the remaining interpretations of 'cosmic liturgies' or 'historic terrors' are well-learned additions of some scholars that can not break away from the habit of burdening reality with their erudition" (Stahl 1983: 173).

The fact that the ballad extends into the universe of beliefs and funeral practices is unquestionable, and, of course, neither Dan Botta nor Lucian Blaga presume to possess the competence and the scientific responsibility of the ethnographer and of the folklorist (as historian of religions, Eliade is an exception here) that would entitle them to consider, however, their approach a legitimate one, as long as it was decoding deeper significations of the ballad, distinguishable only at a certain speculative level.[5] Blaga's or Dan Botta's conclusions can be criticized or completely rejected, yet the fact that they are discovering new meanings and introducing personal values to an archaic spiritual universe they cannot be attributed to their method" (Eliade 1995: 244-45). This also applies to Mircea Eliade, but only to a certain degree and from a certain perspective, despite the fact that sometimes his endeavour to interpret all historical events according to his 'own' interpretive framework leads to forced interpretations, although his status of historian of religions would oblige him to show more restraint.

As we shall see, ethnography can bring us only to a certain point in our attempt to interpret the attitude of the *mioritic* shepherd, unless we accept the variant of pessimism and fatalist resignation, proposed by Michelet (which was followed by counter-reactions that surpassed in number those who accepted

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[5] It is somehow the position that opposes Nietzsche to Willamowitz and, more recently, Walter Otto to Nilson in interpreting the Greek religious spirit.

Michelet's interpretation without a deeper analysis).

However, three evidences challenge this interpretation. Firstly, it cannot be argued that the shepherd is not defending himself, only that such a gesture is not recorded. The young ewe advised the shepherd to call for a loyal and stronger dog, but the poem also does not narrate whether or not the advice was followed. Therefore, we notice an aspect that indicates the lack of cohesion in the epical structure. Secondly, the whole reaction of the shepherd is determined by a hypothesis and not by reality. He did not say: 'And when I die (I will die)' but 'And if I to were to die (if I am going to die).' This hypothetical feature allows openings to epical alternatives, but none of them will be replayed in the continuation of the poem.[6] The ballad in this variant has no epical ending; the entire narration is reduced to the initial frame, the decision for murder, the plot's disclosure - and it stops in a moment of tension.The rest of the poem remains essentially lyrical. The text represents a succession of gradual change of moods from serenity to tragic feelings. The third counter-argument is represented by the presence of this tragic feeling. (Pop and Ruxandoiu 1978: 340)

Moreover, we could examine the ballad from the aesthetic angle, "the only way that would not alter the meanings of our folklore masterpiece,"and thus it becomes "clear that [it] is nonsense to ask the mioritic hero for a gesture of defense or struggle when the ballad

takes the step from epic to lyric and to understand his attitude as a fatalistic acceptance of death - as some exegetes did – represents a grave error of artistic logics (sic! n.n.); the aim of this folklore work thus ceases to be an epic one" (Olteanu 1994: 25).

For the purposes of our discussion, the interpretation suggested by Eliade, that is, "the capacity to cancel the consequences apparently irremediable of a tragic event, loading them with values, unknown until then," by a "religious outlook that does not engage pessimism, nor resignation or passivity," as it is the case in re-interpretation of Christianity, where moments that are assumed as moments belonging to Christ's drama and, finally, transfigured (Eliade 1995: 263), does not seem to reveal a better account about the *mioritic* vision over life (death) either.

And if in his characteristic style Emil Cioran wrote that "the passive abandon to fate and death, the unfaith in the efficiency of individual and in the strength, the minor distance from all the world's aspects created that national poetic curse called *Miorita* that, next to the chroniclers' wisdom, represents the unhealed wound of Romanian soul" (Cioran 1990: 66-67); what seems more important is that a philosopher like Constantin Noica - probably irritated by the multitude of dithyrambic and trivial exegesis – has not distanced himself enough not to attach every thought to this work, saying that

under the spell of *Miorita*, we have not distanced ourselves enough from it and we have looked for the Romanian vision over the Being in it (and good for us ! – n.n.). Anyone in possession of an insight into the modulations of the Being cannot do to the Romanian soul the injustice of considering it from a single angle, that of *Miorita*, and the resignation in the face of death. *Miorita* can be a unique success of our folkloric creation, but cannot stand as the sole measure of the philosophical sensitivity of a spirit for

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[6] Pavel Apostol considers that the 'scholar' composer of the ballad succeeded in taking away any ambiguity of the conditional (and when = if) in the phrase where the subordinate clause is placed before the main clause "and if I were…" with no consent of the logical subject and thus remain only the objective possibility (see Pavel Apostol 1964: 75 – 76).

which *to be* or *not to be* appears much better orchestrated." (Noica 1976: 60)[7]

It seems that "Noica was not warned about the fact that the shepherd's *locking* into *resignation* is only a hermeneutical problem, one of the several possible readings of the myth" (Codreanu 1991: 1-2). Codreanu continues that "only a shallow reading could insist upon the error of perceiving the mioritic shepherd as 'resigned'" (1991: 2). That would do the Romanian soul "the injustice of considering it from a single angle (an outside one) of *Miorita*" (ibid).

It is obvious that this endeavour can not be successfully pursued unless two implicit premises are precisely stated. Firstly, the capability of the language to circulate contents (not necessarily on the conscious level) with a grade of depth greater than the pragmatic level, contents that belong to the cultural affiliation of individuals and reflect the mentality specific to its social-cultural area, all the way to the ontological level of world 'settlement.' Basically, "each language is (also, after all) the wisdom of the world, in one of its versions" (Noica 1978: 48). Depending on its language, each people can have a different level of access to its own Being. "Reality has more or less Being, and Being, in turn, has degrees of accomplishment in the bosom of reality" (Noica 1978: 64). And language being the vehicle of Being,

each people gives the dimension of its Being according to its language. In our case, "the experience of the Being registered in our language would be (…) a kind of the essence rather than a certain and immediate existence" (Noica 1978: 63). In other words, language represents one of the best ways of accessing the depth of the spirituality of a people and it is also the language that takes part in shaping this spirit and comforts its historical continuity. "[T]his spirituality that had put its seal on the language, crystallized into tropes and figures of speech, will continue to impose itself through the language, moulding the thinking and the vision for the next generations" (Del Conte 1990: 280-281). The vision was shared by 'the most representative' inhabitant of the 'dwelling of the Being,' Mihai Eminescu.

> Identifying with a very modern intuition the spirit and the language – 'spirit and language are almost identical' – he will insist on saying that language is not only a spiritual treasure but also the guardian and preserver of some own treasures. No matter how premature would be to express the abstracts of the reason, there is no language that would not be able to express and communicate the life of the feeling; the proof is the fact that a man can fully understand and interpret his heart only in his own language. (Del Conte 1990: 281)

Secondly, the existence of a 'common' mentality, proper to each culture, something that Lucian Blaga calls "stylistic matrix" that "can be the permanent substratum for all the creations from a lifetime of an individual, this stylistic matrix could be, at least in its essential features, common to many individuals, to an entire people or even to a part of a humankind living in the same epoch" (Blaga 1969: 107). This matrix is accountable for the 'unity' of a cultural community's outlook, without which it is improbable to find the same *Weltanschauung*, the same cultural agreement, as it has to be ascertained only by natural, psychological, and social conditions whose variations in space and time are

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[7] Noica addressed the motive in many other writings*:* "the misinterpretation of vision over Being by focusing solely on *Miorita*" (Noica 1978: 58-59), therefore, reducing the conception of Being to the unilateral vision of *Miorita* is a graceful but innocent renunciation of the 'gravity' of Being from other ontological conceptions, the idea of such a diverse and 'easy-going' Being could give someone the sentiment of 'neglect' and thus lead him / her to attribute to Romanians the mioritic pattern of 'fearlessness' in the face of death. The 'lightness' of Being is just the expression of freedom, almost of the exuberance captured in Romanian vision. But our fairy of the Being says more than the gravity of other gloomy and overwhelming traditional ontologies. And such a fairy is obviously different from the one mostly artistic of *Miorita"* (Noica 1978: 61 – 62).

significant even within the same community. "The existence of an unconscious stylistic matrix itself explains such an impressive fact as the obvious stylistic consistency of some creations. The stylistic 'unity' is often achieved through miraculous purity" (Blaga 1969: 112). It is present especially at the unconscious level and

> what happens on the unconscious level has a more anonymous and collective character than what occurs on the level of consciousness. Usually, a stylistic matrix varies from individual to individual, in a certain place and in a certain period, not only by secondary and accidental determinations […] but this stylistic matrix is shared by the whole community. (Blaga 1969: 112)

The existence of the matrix does not involve a bland 'monotony,' an endless replication, 'different masks in the same play.' It only inspires the works marked by the same seal, but loaded with other horizons, attitudes and accents. It represents the attire that covers the Being of that people, the first feature that differentiates this Being and brings it from the status of immutability to manifest itself. *Miorita* seems to be the dimension of this stylistically matrix of the Romanian people, which would explain the reasons behind its vast popularity and high reputation among the folk songs. "*Miorita* drew everybody's attention from the beginning, and this has happened in the subconscious of our people, indissolubly connected with its cosmic space as a matrix space that Lucian Blaga called *mioritic*" (Husar 1999: 81). The language plays an important role in its set up and communication:

> The human thought is not a phenomenon that is independent of language, a heritage from uncounted past generations; it indicates the path of thinking and forces it to follow up the meaning, materializing, after all,

the underlying spiritual endowment. (Del Conte 1990: 288)[8]

The problem raised in this ballad is that of the relationship with death, a relationship that is structured by the feeling of the Being, the perception at the unconscious level of the structures of Being in its full materialization. The way in which the Being is intuited in Romanian culture is masterfully summarized by Eminescu's concept of *archaeus*[9], which posits the Being not as abstract rationality or immobile vastness (as the Western philosophy has taught us), but as a deep structure of 'that which could never have been,' but whose existence is possible because it exists, that can only be intuited or perceived in its development, "the archaeity does not have just a philosophy and an aesthetic, but also an *ethos*, consisting in the effort, in the powerful will of embodiment, of materialization" (Tiutiucă 1994: 20).

It seems to us that the distinctiveness of the Romanian feeling of Being lays in the possibility of grasping the modulations of the Being through language. "The Romanian feeling is different from its last certainty, but only in appearance and status and not with regards to people's acknowledgement" (Noica 1978: 63). Thus, *archaeus* appears to be an entity from the pre-Being category that always calls for existence and that cannot be perceived until it is *realized*. "Archaeus is conceived as a set of structured possibilities, ready to pass the heart of reality if favorable conditions are offered for its realization. And what needs to be emphasized is its force to be in a certain way and only in this way" (Noica 1992: 439-440).

Let us explore the ways in which the *archaeus* concept informs the attitude of the *mioritic* shepherd. The place that draws our attention is the passage from epic to lyric, when, after

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[8] Apud E. *Romanidad oriental y romanidad occidental*, in *Cahiers* S. Puşcariu, 1953, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 4. The quote is also in the original quoted work in Rosa Del Conte . p. 288.

[9] I analyse this concept in my article "Mioritic Archaeus" (in press) in Romanian Philosophical Review.

revelation of the conspiracy 'the story' ends. The interruption point offers access into the horizons of Being. The imminence of death confronts the *mioritic* hero with the existence of the no-world. The no-world (in this case death) belonged – paraphrasing Noica – to 'will be Being' but, suddenly (as the news comes through) it passes to the register of 'is to be.' In other words, a 'common' order is hastened by flaming one level (it would be), will be Being – would to be – is to be. We can observe that the shepherd still reacts at the level of 'it will be Being'. 'If I were to die' (If I am doomed to die) is an uncontrollable probable, but more remote than the imminent 'is to be.' The 'shock' that encloses a moving ontological ambiguity, as I mentioned before, is the 'cutting-off point' that will allow the leap to 'fantasy.' But this fantastic reality does not aim at "what is circumscribed in universal prose of this style that often forms the keystone of the entire narrative endeavour: 'the game' between normal and abnormal, of 'the break' between these states within the order of phenomenal existence" (Ciobanu 1984: 33-34), because the no-world belongs to him as much as does the world. The way that things are determines the meditation over his life. The hasty closeness in time of death draws him closer to this unknown in the imagination. Since the occurrence of death before the wedding would prevent the fulfilment of his life, the shepherd tries to prevent it by imagining death as a wedding. He realizes his life by melting the two crucial events for him, the wedding and death. And his life is completed through his wedding to death. As Noica put it:

> It is certain that this man's destiny of being unable, but trying to act, represents at the same time his misery and his greatness: man cannot find unless he has to seek for and cannot seek without trying (or being tried, as in this case n.n.), but while he is trying, he imagines and invents so that what it is *found*, is in fact, invented. (Noica 1978: 66)

The no-world that is ready to erupt is the one that impels our hero to imagine and to invent.

It is as possible as it 'is to be' and the shepherd invests in it everything that is more intimate: familiar environment, customs, experiences, and own opinions. It is a notably Romanian vision of Being able to conceive the Being with no abstract determinations, *intuited* in the real. As Noica wrote:

> The Romanian experience of Being shows that something can be expressed even when it is conceived with no other determination, as Being itself enters into 'situations' that are determined. […] Being reveals and lets itself known by its situations. The Romanian feeling of Being is something close, accessible, and meaningful. Being has nothing to do with the absolute, the irrational and the ineffable that would become accessible only by sensitive or intellectual intuition. Being has a foundation and can be understood in its making […]. (Noica 1978: 66)

The *mioritic* hero discovers it exactly in this moment of creation of Being and accomplishes it. The form that reveals the unfulfilling of the Being is death. And since the "no-Being is only the cessation of the Being, but not a reality to keep it in balance" (Noica 1978: 67) and death is identified only as a moment of *archaety* and is projected within the order of *What Is*, as he is intuiting it. According to a Romanian tale 'death has a single name and it can be only one.'

"Given that the Being, which in the Romanian vision of the world is not unique and monolithic, does not exist at a single level of subsistence and carries more than one face (but a single model and archetype), death is everyone's destiny and *measure*" (Noica 1978: 141-142). Confronted with his death, the *mioritic* shepherd knows that he has the possibility to make it at the measure of his soul. He is not planning to rebel because this is where he stands. Death is understood as part of life and does not stand in opposition to it. Death fulfils life because without death life cannot be considered consumed and completed. Without death, life has not

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exhausted its meanings and is therefore not complete. Death is the only thing that could accomplish the passing of the individual being from a state of insignificance to the sphere of meaningfulness. And at the same time, with the spectrum of death, that reveals the unforeseen, the entire life can be observed in its plenitude, a vision that allows the perception of the general, and thus the individual intuits the existence of the general, which makes him peaceful. He has the breathing space to imagine and create his own no-world that would not exist without him and without which he would not be complete. "The essential element is comprised by *the ability of cancelling the seemingly irremediable consequences of a tragic event, loading them with values unknown before*" (Eliade 1995: 263).[10] "It is certain that his soul, a traveller under the sweet-bitter stars, does not let him be overwhelmed by any ferocious fatalism, but does not wildly assert the trust in front of the powers of the nature or destiny where he does not see final enemies" (Blaga 1969: 127). Because, as Noica put it:

> the man does not reveal only the Being but everything that surrounds it, as himself is prior to the Being, because he is not simply *in* something but is *in* it for a reason. Man tries, sees his own limits and the limits that exist in the world, he enlarges the real to the eventual, re-makes it as possible and then sees it in the eminency of its accomplishment as something real, and afterwards contemplates it in its accomplished reality. (Noica 1978: 65)

Therefore, he will create a no-world according to his measure without being interrupted by other order of things. This is the reason why any echo from the surrounding world cannot and is not allowed to enter this no-world, created according to his image, his hopes,

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[10] Eliade continues "We will never get tired of saying that such a process is far from showing a passive resignation but, on the contrary, it illustrates the unreachable creative force of the popular genius."

dreams, and disappointments, a no-world where he realizes, accomplishes and completes the trial of the *archaeity* of reaching out the existence. "*Miorita* therefore does not represent a shelter of resignation (in poetry, in fantasy), but the wise and the well-reflected resort to the reality of a splendour often occulted to those kept in the whirl (or rather in the morass) of a deaf and blind life" (Steinhardt 1986: 105). It represents, as we hope we succeeded in showing, the way in which the Romanian relates to his entire existence.

The Romanian option of the destiny is the *archaeity*. It is not the unlimited trust in the total freedom of the human being, its ability to do everything, independently from the universe in which he was socialized and where he has lived, but nor is he an actor obeying destiny's inexorable scenario that sooner or later, in one way or another, has to unfold. It is the attitude of the man that takes things as they are, not because he knows he can not change the flow of events, but because he understands it. Because he intuits that beyond them there is an order that wants and must come to an accomplishment, an order that he himself belongs to, but also an order than is meaningless without him, an order that gives him a reason but is only endowed with reason through him. Only by him the order can come to life and only he can give it meaning. He is the part that justifies the whole and gives it existence at the same time. It is obvious that in this case to speak about resignation or fatalism regarding the *mioritic* shepherd signifies a total misunderstanding of an entire culture, of an original mode to relate to the world.

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